



Borough of WILKINSBURG

WEED and SEED Initiative

2009-2014 Revitalization Plan

"Except the LORD builds the house they labor in vain that build it", (Ps.127:1)

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Acknowledgement:

There would be no Wilkinsburg 2009 – 2010 WEED & SEED Revitalization Plan if it were not for the efforts and commitment of all the citizens, law enforcement officials, government officials, agency and organization leaders, who responded to the call for participation in the process to restore and retain this critical funding source.

We wish to thank all the incredible people who support the restructuring efforts for the Wilkinsburg Weed and Seed Initiative and who have remained optimistic about the 2009-2010 Revitalization Plan.

We are especially appreciative of the true professionalism and efforts that every A.I.D. Team member demonstrated who attended the various (emergency) meetings that were called at short notice so that crucial decisions could be made and voted upon in order to meet guidelines and regulations required by the State. We would have never been able to submit our application by the April 10th, 2009 deadline without the quick, unselfish actions of our A.I.D. Team members which we know will enable Wilkinsburg Weed and Seed to enhance the Wilkinsburg community.

Thank you to everyone who has played any part in the betterment of Wilkinsburg. Your efforts and commitment to this initiative have been priceless.

Lastly and most importantly, we give all credit to GOD who has answered the prayers of many who have continuously prayed for the best for the Wilkinsburg community. It is through your efforts and your prayers that our newly restructured Wilkinsburg Weed and Seed Initiative and AID Team will continue to develop best practice strategies that meet the *New Approach* criteria.

Mission Statement:

The Mission of the Wilkinsburg Weed & Seed Initiative is to unite with the overall community to fight against crime and delinquency through active Law Enforcement Activities. To Weed out and/or eradicate criminal activity in and around our community and schools. To Revitalize the community and restore order and decency through Prevention, Intervention, Treatment and Community Policing Initiatives leading to an enhanced quality of life and a restored sense of pride in our Borough.

Vision Statement:

“Wilkinsburg strives to become a vibrant community with an enhanced quality of life for all who live, work, play, and/ or frequent our community.”

Introduction:

The Borough of Wilkinsburg Weed and Seed Initiative has undergone a major restructuring process that began in October of 2008 when PCCD funding was suspended due to failure to meet program requirements and guidelines. In February 2009, the Borough led this effort through the restructuring of the AID Team and the appointment of an Interim Administrator, Gail Mitchell Hall.

Since the restructuring process began, the Wilkinsburg site has been eager to pursue programs and implement initiatives that support the recommendations and strategies of the 2009-2014 Revitalization Plan designed to improve our neighborhoods. The Wilkinsburg Weed & Seed Initiative is but one of the opportunities afforded this community in our attempt to make Wilkinsburg once again a thriving community desirable to all and plan to make every effort to improve the quality of life for its citizenry and youth.

Our newly restructured core AID Team (voting members) is comprised of a diverse representation of local government officials, faith and community-based leaders as well as citizens of the Borough of Wilkinsburg who dare to dream and motivate themselves and others to accept responsibility to carry out our mission. The entire Assistance for Impact Delegation (AID) Team consists of about 35-45 members who are in leadership positions, some are board members and/or heads of various agencies/organizations as well as residents.

This challenge is compounded by the increasingly diverse nature of urban communities in general. On the other hand, Wilkinsburg, despite its condition, is a community with assets that can be harnessed for change. Community pride is strong, which is also a huge asset for Wilkinsburg and when focused in the right direction can generate significant community mobilization.

While preparing to meet the challenges of the PA Weed and Seed Initiative, the Borough of Wilkinsburg, its citizens, law enforcement officials, government officials, community leaders, business owners, and other groups and organizations have collaborated to develop this Revitalization Plan whose purpose is to reduce crime while enhancing the quality of life for the residents and business owners while it:

- Implements the four key federal components with promising new strategies developed by Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD);
- Requires local law enforcement to enter into collaborative partnerships with State Police, the Attorney General's office, and other law enforcement organizations for the purpose of reducing crime and violence in the target community;
- Conducts blight elimination projects;

- Improves and increases prevention/intervention/treatment programs and activities that will enhance the quality of life for local youth and adults;
- Addresses behavioral health and special needs issues that disproportionately affect low-income families, such as health status, access to health services and the impact of domestic violence and crime;
- Uses the surrounding landscape to foster community restoration, economic development, and increased business ownership, as well as property and capital acquisition for entrepreneurial development;
- Promotes community unity geared toward the development of a better quality of life regardless of ethnic or religious background;
- Develops Community-Policing that will bridge the gap for increased public credibility and visibility of the Police Department while establishing ongoing dialog with community residents to solve crime problems through a systematic process that addresses the causes of crime.
- Enforces and prosecutes individuals who engage in violent street crimes, child abuse, neglect, vandalism, alcohol and drug abuse.
- Develops collaborations and partnerships among community leaders to reduce illegal fire arms possession thereby reducing the homicide rate.

Target Area:

The Borough of Wilkinsburg is located in the east central portion of Allegheny County, nine miles east of downtown Pittsburgh, and borders the eastern boundary of the city. Wilkinsburg is a Borough filled with diverse neighborhoods and encompasses only 2.03 square miles.

The target area is defined as West — Port Authority Martin L. King Busway; East — Swissvale Avenue; North — Grand Avenue and South along Franklin Avenue. This area includes the central downtown business corridor of the Borough of Wilkinsburg.

In 1987, the Borough was declared “financially distressed” under Pennsylvania’s Financially Distressed Municipalities Act. Given this status and recognizing the need for a revitalization effort to become a more viable community, several planning attempts have been initiated, but have not succeeded; a condition which has been attributed to certain internal forces. These internal forces include 1) a factionalized Borough Council; 2) racial conflict, 3) absence of trust among competing interests, 4) lack of a broadly accepted leadership group with a shared vision, and 5) multiple and competing local organizations with special community development interests.

In many respects, the fragmented description of Wilkinsburg is characteristic of many other communities in Western Pennsylvania that are struggling with the challenge of how to develop a shared vision of their future, and one that advances the common good. This challenge is compounded by the increasingly diverse nature of urban communities in general.

On the other hand, Wilkinsburg, despite its condition, is a community with assets that can be harnessed for change. First, it is readily accessible – by car or public transportation - to the important health care facilities in the City of Pittsburgh, to the many higher education institutions in the city, and to the city’s rich cultural district. In the Blackridge section of Wilkinsburg, good quality housing and long time tenure in these homes are stabilizing forces. Second, community pride is strong.

Community Background:

The Borough of Wilkinsburg is one of the oldest suburban communities in Western Pennsylvania, and like its counterparts in the region, the community has undergone a significant transformation and has struggled to develop a comprehensive vision for revitalizing the community.

Wilkinsburg is a culturally diverse, low income, aging urban suburb of the City of Pittsburgh that is struggling to revitalize its neighborhoods and business districts. Once a thriving Borough, Wilkinsburg has absorbed more than its fair share of social and economic ills. The decline of the steel industry in the 1980's hit the town especially hard and in 1987 Wilkinsburg was declared a distressed community.

Over the past forty years, the Borough has experienced a major decline in population as well as a considerable change in the diversity of the community.

The original settlement of what was then a small village occurred in the late 1770s. In the mid-1800s, Wilkinsburg was annexed to the city of Pittsburgh; an action later reversed in 1871 when Wilkinsburg returned to its independent status. It was incorporated as a borough in 1887 and soon grew into a healthy and vibrant residential community, with a thriving business district and good quality housing.

The population of Wilkinsburg peaked in the 1940s with a population over 31,000, and then began a precipitous decline over the next several decades, with a 2000 population of 19,196. Similar demographic changes occurred in its racial composition, with a decline in the white population from approximately 60 percent in 1980 to 28.7 percent in 2000, and an increase in the African American population from 37 percent in 1980 to approximately 66 percent in 2000. While the age distribution of the population of Wilkinsburg has remained fairly stable over the past two decades, 2000 Census data indicates that the borough has a significantly higher percentage of persons under the age of forty-five which is 61 percent compared to 49 percent in Allegheny County. On economic and social indicators of family income, poverty, and education achievement, current data suggests Wilkinsburg is considerably less well off than other communities. Family median income stands at \$26,621 (2000), compared to the state median household income of \$40,106. Its poverty rate at 16.5% is more than double the state poverty rate of 7.8%, and close to double the national poverty rate of 9.2 percent.

Along with the demographic changes over the past two decades, Wilkinsburg has experienced other social and economic problems such as crime, unemployment (5.2%), absentee landlordism, building vacancies, and accelerated deterioration of existing housing. Regarding the latter, although there has been some new housing built in recent years, an estimated 80 percent of current housing is 30 years or older.

Many of the Borough's residents live at or below the poverty level, 29.5 percent of those are headed by a single female parent households. Specifically, according to 2000 census data, 17.3% of Wilkinsburg's population is living at or below the poverty level-compared to 11.5% in Allegheny County.

Of the total number of occupied housing units in the borough (9,138) approximately 5,890 of those are renter occupied. The impact of the high percentage of renter occupied housing units supports a transient and potentially unstable environment. Finally the Borough of Wilkinsburg has the highest percentage of Section 8 housing in Allegheny County.

Aging housing stock, absentee landlords, loss of population and the inability to identify responsible property owners has led to an increase in the numbers of vacant and abandoned properties. In fact, there are approximately 693 vacant/abandon structures in the borough. These structures serve to harbor criminal activity and exacerbate blight throughout the community.

Ninety-eight percent (98%) of the students in Wilkinsburg's public school system are of African American descent. Eighty percent (80%) are from economically disadvantaged families and qualify for free or subsidized lunches. Over seventy percent (70%) come from single parent households.

According to the District's Student Assistance Program (SAP), drug and alcohol use among middle and high school students is at an all time high and increasing. Approximately (50%) or more have experienced some type of alcohol, drug or tobacco related use.

Another alarming statistic is juvenile arrests which continue to be rising locally and across Allegheny County. Reports of child and sexual abuse in grades 7 – 12, in most cases, indicate that the perpetrator is a family member or friend frequenting the household.

Lastly, student attendance is another area of concern in the District. According to the District attendance office, unexcused absences range from 3.1% to 5.4% in the three elementary schools and increases to 6.4% at the middle school level. By the time students reach high school, their unexcused absence rate climbs to 9.7%. Overall, absences including excused absences go from a 6.5% average at the elementary level to 11% in the middle school to 13% by high school with a dropout rate of 9%.

Tardiness is yet another factor for concern. By the time students reach high school, the average daily tardiness rate is 29.1%, we can and must do better and demand from our youth their very best. This proposal recognizes the importance of reaching out to our area youth and contains strategies for a brighter future for our youth/young adults.

Plan Components:

This proposal is focused on The Four Key Federal Weed and Seed Initiative Components: Law Enforcement, Community Policing, Prevention, Intervention and Treatment and Neighborhood Restoration. This Plan has a strategic agenda for the identification and correction of measurable components that are both social and economic factors that have a negative impact on the Wilkinsburg target area. With respect to Wilkinsburg's economic health, the Borough government and its Weed and Seed Initiative has pledged to step up its efforts to develop, maintain and sustain programs that will enable the community:

- To suppress crime by identifying, apprehending and prosecuting criminals.
- To establish collaborations with law enforcement agencies and/or including the criminal justice systems such as community courts, victim witness protection services and offender reentry programs from all levels of government so that the Wilkinsburg target area can benefit and utilize each agency's resources while eliminating duplication of services in the target area.
- To create collaborations through community policing efforts that will establish an ongoing dialog with community residents and police that will help solve crimes, create processes that address underlying causes of crime and become more community-focused and pro-active in our approach to minimize crime and increase police visibility to encourage community participation and ultimately reduce crime.
- To create nuisance and blight removal programs.
- To minimize redundancies and maximize interagency cooperation in planning and providing services to our target area. By establishing collaborations, partnerships, and referrals, we optimize the use of scarce resources and optimize outcomes by utilizing evidence-based Prevention, Intervention and Treatment programs for individuals, small groups and families.
- To create and promote protective factors that will reduce risks and create an environment in which crime and violence cannot thrive.
- To bridge gaps and close the gaps that are beyond our target area.
- To implement blight elimination efforts to restore our community's economic and social conditions by utilizing and creating collaborations between available programs, services and resources to improve our housing stock and the physical environment of our neighborhoods.

The Weed and Seed Initiative will provide additional structure and many of the necessary tools for pursuing the above goals. We will seek out community residents via the Wilkinsburg Sun and word-of-mouth, which are powerful tools for advertising. By organizing and linking our local law enforcement, criminal justice system, community leaders, human and social service agencies, local residents, faith-based leaders, and their affiliates behind a common goal, the

community can be strengthened to improve the overall quality of life for residents, the private sector and business community alike.

Through motivation we can encourage the above-mentioned entities to take an active role in reclaiming our community by Weeding then Seeding as we strive to become more responsible, accountable and sustainable. By working together as a team and utilizing our resources wisely, by leveraging wherever possible, Wilkinsburg can press forward and provide more opportunities that will address some of the underlying problems in our target area. The Weed and Seed Initiative is visible evidence of a change in our attitude toward one another and what a community can do if we work, trust and believe in one another.

The current Plan is intentionally, narrowly focused and designed to result in realistic, implementable goals and objectives.

Law Enforcement:

The focus of the Weed and Seed Law Enforcement component is to improve the quality of life in Wilkinsburg by developing a safe environment in which to live and prosper. This will be accomplished by working hand-in-hand with our residents, local businesses, community- and faith-based organizations and law enforcement agencies.

The target area encompasses, for law enforcement purposes, an area identified as Wilkinsburg Police Sector 2 and portions of Sector 1. This is a heavily-populated, urban area and includes the heart of the Wilkinsburg business district. According to the crime statistics provided by the Wilkinsburg Police Department, nearly 80% of the crime takes place in these sectors.

Significant drug activity emerged in the Borough in late 1987. In 1990, a surge in the use of crack cocaine as the drug of choice added to the already existing problems. By 1991, when the Police Department first formally approached the problem, drug activity and sales had already developed a strong foothold in the community. Since 1991, drug arrests have more than doubled. The Police Department was able to utilize saturation patrols in the target area which resulted in the arrests of dozens of drug dealers.

The inception of the Weed and Seed Initiative helped the Borough to begin to make significant progress in its fight against drug-related crime. The primary goal is, and always will be, to eliminate violent crime against persons and property, drug trafficking and prostitution in the target area.

As noted in the Uniform Crime Reports for 2006, 2007 and 2008 and detailed in the Community Profile, drug-related activity and weapons possession are the greatest criminal challenges facing the community today.

In conformance with the Law Enforcement federal component, our short-term goals and objectives for the current program year are:

- ✓ To maintain and support the law enforcement efforts initiated by the Weed and Seed Initiative.
- ✓ To support and collaborate with law enforcement agencies from all levels of government, including various aspects of the criminal justice system, in order to suppress criminal activity.
- ✓ To expand crime prevention programs and community collaborations/partnerships in the target area.
- ✓ To increase police credibility and visibility, thereby improving public safety and police/community relations.
- ✓ To eliminate and/or drastically reduce street level and open air drug dealing.
- ✓ To create effective measures to arrest and counter the proliferation of blighted properties, graffiti, theft and criminal mischief.

- ✓ To develop collaboration among community leaders to reduce illegal fire arms possession, thereby reducing the homicide rate and other serious crimes.
- ✓ To promote and enhance a safe environment for target area businesses and neighborhoods, and support crime prevention programs to reduce all types of crime within the target area.
- ✓ To continue saturation patrols in the target area.

2010 AND BEYOND

- The Borough is currently in the process of updating its 10-year Comprehensive Plan which will include a Business District Revitalization Plan. One of the issues identified which has impeded development of the business district is perceived and, at times, real concerns regarding safety. Restoration of the foot patrol in the business district has been identified through neighborhood meetings as a program receiving great support from the community. This program should ultimately be restored and expanded to include year-round coverage and patrols near the Middle/ High School at dismissal time to ensure safe passage for youth.
- Implement an Anonymous Complaint form process on the Borough website where residents can anonymously inform law enforcement of drug and other crimes affecting our community.
- Secure additional resources for the abandoned vehicle program. This program is currently administered by the Special Operations Unit of the police department.
- Restore and expand the FBI Adopt-A-School program.

Community Policing:

The focus of the Community Policing component is to develop cooperative relationships between police officers and community residents thereby fostering a greater level of trust between the Wilkinsburg police and its citizens.

In conformance with the Community Policing federal component, our short-term goals and objectives for the current program year are:

- ✓ To continue to offer the Wilkinsburg Police Academy training for youth and adults.
- ✓ To implement new and creative ways to draw residents, business owners and leaders from all segments of the community to engage in a higher level of participation in crime suppression activities, such as citizen street patrols.
- ✓ To create opportunities for law enforcement and the citizens to interact via attendance at community events and participation in neighborhood block clubs.

2010 AND BEYOND

- Increase the number of crime prevention programs available to residents.
- Provide a safe, crime-free play zone throughout all neighborhood playgrounds and parks. This includes implementing the safety recommendations of the 2001 Comprehensive Recreation, Parks, and Open Space Plan in order to provide an environment that will encourage our children to enjoy and respect our community's recreational facilities. These solutions should include additional lighting, security cameras and a crime prevention education curriculum.
- Develop and implement a police athletic league based upon best practices of programs employed in other communities.

Prevention/Intervention/Treatment:

Current resources do not begin to meet the needs of the target area in the area of prevention, intervention and treatment. More innovative support is needed for families and youth of all age groups. The programs supported under this plan component will concentrate on an array of human service elements to foster an environment in which crime and violence cannot thrive. PIT focuses on neighborhood efforts to enhance protective factors while reducing risks, thus promoting wholesome behavior that can lead to good health, well-being and personal success.

As outlined in the Community Background section of this Plan, the target area suffers from virtually every risk factor such as economic deprivation, racial conflict, high drop out rates, teen pregnancy and drug use.

In conformance with the Prevention, Intervention and Treatment federal component, our short-term goals and objectives for the current program year are:

- ✓ To promote assistance programs, support services, and referrals.
- ✓ To create youth empowerment programming featuring education, technology, business and career development.
- ✓ To support and expand prevention programs high risk youth.
- ✓ To provide remediation and enrichment activities, such as job training, tutoring and mentoring for youth afterschool.
- ✓ To provide programs to reduce truancy and improve educational achievement which will have a positive effect on juvenile crime.
- ✓ To promote and encourage young people to succeed in school and help them to enjoy learning.
- ✓ To promote healthy behaviors, such as resisting alcohol and sexual activity.

2010 AND BEYOND

To increase or enhance awareness of and access to services regarding health issues facing the community.

- To increase or enhance awareness of and access to existing services including physical, social, private duty/respite care and mental health programs.
- To enhance the quality of life through providing and increasing the awareness of, and access to, opportunities for recreation, entertainment, social, cultural, family support and community services.

Neighborhood Restoration:

The impact of neighborhood blight in our target area, and target community overall, has eliminated a safe living environment for residents. The high concentration of vacant and abandoned properties is associated with many community problems including crime, illegal drug traffic, and other illicit behavior.

The goal of the Neighborhood Restoration Plan is to stabilize blighted areas and reduce continued deterioration of structures through securing vacant and abandoned properties and maintenance of vacant lots. It is well-documented that one or two blighted properties in a neighborhood block significantly reduces surrounding property values and makes it much less desirable for neighbors to stay in the neighborhood. This obviously has an adverse impact on the tax base in the community on two levels – reduced assessed value and outmigration.

In conformance with the Neighborhood Restoration federal component, our short-term goals and objectives for the current program year are:

- ✓ To continue to support the efforts of the municipality to demolish those structures which are no longer structurally sound and pose a public safety hazard.
- ✓ To decrease or eliminate blighted areas through strict code enforcement and alternative land use.
- ✓ To continue to support the efforts of the municipality in processing vacant properties through the Allegheny County Vacant Property Recovery Program.
- ✓ To eliminate blight through general, coordinated clean-up with continued maintenance through local public-private partnerships, a mix of block clubs, other community resources, and some outside funding.
- ✓ To secure abandoned properties.

2010 AND BEYOND

- Continue with the systematic identification, evaluation and recommended disposition of all abandoned structures in the target area (approximately 555 in the target area and 693 in the target community). Disposition would include demolition or rehabilitation of existing abandoned structures, construction of new housing (single-family or multi-unit), creation of attractive green space, other alternative land uses (such as community gardens).
- Develop an anti-littering campaign and promote community beautification through blight elimination programs.
- Develop, distribute and analyze the impact of blight on the community through a community survey, designed to obtain information from residents on issues in their

neighborhood. This would include, but would not be limited to, vacant structures, observed/known criminal activity, nuisance properties, etc.

- Support programs which provide for sustainable strategies to vacant lot maintenance.
- Support programming which would add a community art component to blight elimination and engage school students after school or through a summer program.

Conclusion:

Wilkinsburg is at a critical juncture in its history. While the municipality has done a remarkable job at holding municipal expenditures, revenues continue to decline as a result of an eroding tax base. There are major barriers to investment that exist. Addressing these issues takes a significant amount of resources.

Wilkinsburg has great potential to be a growing and progressive community. Wilkinsburg's excellent stock of affordable homes represents the history and culture of the Pittsburgh region. Its diversity—ethnically and economically—is unique and its close proximity to Pittsburgh, the region's social and economic center, enhances this potential. Combined with its increasingly involved and engaged community, Wilkinsburg seems to be on the cusp of a renewal.